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AUTHOR Maslin-Ostrowski, Pat; Ackerman, Richard H.
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ABSTRACT

This study's purpose was to understand further "how" significant leadership crises create a very particular context for telling stories and, specifically, "how" the lives of school leaders are affected by the stories they tell. The study presents the stories of seven private and public school leaders who have experienced a serious conflict, dilemma, or critical event in their leadership practice that has in some way profoundly affected or "wounded" them. The study focused on school leader's "narrative identity" to determine "who" in each case the person had become in the story, "how" their story helped them to become that person and "why." The methodology was ethnographic in that it required retrospective interviewing and narrative analysis. Findings suggest that the difficult experiences evoked stories that could be tentatively grouped by common themes. The storytellers chose a restitution story of how the problem was fixed which echoes the myth of principal as hero; a chaos story of near disaster that was notable by what was absent, that is a distressed telling without order or coherence and an uncertain future; or a story of quest, one that leads to a new or evolved story. All themes, however, are apt to be present at different times in each of the stories. Another finding relates to the particular ways in which participants were self conscious and aware of themselves as story makers and tellers, thus could become in a sense "witnesses" to their circumstances. (Contains 25 references.) (NKA)

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The Wounded Leader: Looking for the Good Story

Pat Maslin-Ostrowski, Florida Atlantic University

Richard H. Ackerman, University of Massachusetts, Lowell

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The purpose of this study was to understand further how significant leadership crises create a very particular context for telling stories and, specifically, how the lives of school leaders are affected by the stories they tell. Our study presents the stories of school leaders who have experienced a serious conflict, dilemma or critical event in their leadership practice that has in some way profoundly affected or "wounded" them— a situation akin to an illness that reflects some of the same characteristics--loss of control, predictability, and functioning, disassociation, fear, anger, etc. We were interested not just in the explicit content of the stories--the actions, events and responses--but, specifically in how these leader stories served to address the "woundedness" of the leaders and helped them, in a sense, to heal themselves. We focused, then, on their *narrative identity* (Rincoeur, 1986) attempting to determine who in each case the person had become in their story, how their story helped them to become that person and why.

The so-called craft knowledge that leadership "war stories" offer has been well documented (Barth, 1990; Witherell & Noddings, 1991) and proven to be valuable for a variety of reasons: for the teller's reordering and sense-making in difficult situations, and as teaching and learning for others. Likewise, narratives have found many useful applications in educational research (Elbaz, 1990; Clandinin & Connoly, 1990). Our fundamental interest, however, was in the *story within the story*, what Schaefer (1992) calls the "self-story" or self-narrative (Huberman, 1995), i.e. the self that was being formed in what was being told. The broad objective of the study was to understand the unique ways in which school leaders tell their stories of crisis in order to construct new maps and perceptions of their relationship to themselves and the world.

Perspective

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Our study offers an interpretive perspective rooted in the metaphor of leadership as story (Gardner, 1995). It is a viewpoint, burgeoning rapidly in the literature, which is interested in the "storied nature of human conduct" (Sarbin, 1986)--how human beings deal with experience by constructing stories. Underlying our study is a premise that the story-form is a dominant sense-making tool for school administrators (Ackerman, Donaldson & Van Der Bogert, 1997). Our framework builds on Shulman's (1987) conception of pedagogical content knowledge believing that school administrators (like teachers) imbue, in this case, their crises with their values and meaning reflecting narrative qualities.

We attempt to extend the framework by invoking the metaphor of ill persons as "wounded storytellers" (Frank, 1995). Exploring a number of works on illness experiences studied by medical ethicists and medical anthropologists (Kleinman, 1988; Frank, 1991) we have sought to situate this study in what we view is a larger and more generative panoply of narrative representation.

Methodology

The study was an effort to "listen our way" into the worlds of seven public and private school administrators who were identified as having experienced a crisis or critical event in their leadership practice. The theoretical and practical lens for this study built on methodological strategies that we employed in previous research using case stories to teach educational administration (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1997). Located within the broad perspective of interpretive research (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 1988; Strauss, 1987) the study was ethnographic in that it required retrospective interviewing and narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993).

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Using a simple interview guide we asked open-ended questions that directed participants toward our line of inquiry. Our intent was to facilitate a narrative telling and not to interfere with the participants' stories. We tried to create an interview environment that allowed the story teller to make sense of his or her experience as we "listened in." For example, we did not rush participants, rather we let them speak at great lengths without interruption. With some variation to accommodate the school leaders' schedules and time constraints, three interviews were held with each participant over a period of nine months and interviews lasted from ninety minutes to two hours each (Seidman, 1991).

During the initial interview a narrator was invited to reconstruct his or her life history, telling about past experiences as an educator up to the point of the crisis. This encouraged the narrator to provide a personal context for the stories told in subsequent interviews. In the second interview participants were asked to focus on the details of the critical event or significant experience. Each narrator was asked to reconstruct the experience and tell stories about what happened. Finally, in the third interview narrators were asked to reflect on what was said in the first two interviews, and to talk about what that meant in terms of who they are today as a leader and as a person. They were also invited to reflect on how they presently understand leadership in their lives. What unfolded in the participants' narrative accounts was a combination of a chronology of events and an attempt to give meaning to events.

All interviews were audio taped and later carefully transcribed, incorporating the words of both participant and interviewer. Demographic information was collected through the interviews and confidentiality was promised to each participant. We agreed to change names and places

when using a narrator's words in order to insure privacy, yet never at the expense of the meaning of what he or she said.

During the on-going analysis when we looked for common themes and inconsistencies, our focus was on not just what the school leaders said but how they formed their stories. We were interested in how they told their points of view and perceptions of the experience. With this in mind, we analyzed each participant's story as a narrative entity, that is stories were kept intact and not dissected into categories. After carefully reviewing the small but rich sample of stories, we identified three narrative types, i.e. quest, restitution and chaos stories, that are consistent with the medical metaphor. A leader's story was then selected to describe and discuss each narrative type in this paper. In an effort to enhance validity we conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and based conclusions on the data from stories, along with a consideration of alternative interpretations.

What distinguished this study was the participatory nature of the relationship that we established with our narrators (Bosk, 1979, p. 202). We concluded that insights gleaned from the study were, in part, the result of our relationship and that a research method divorced from our interests, purposes and values as well as theirs was neither possible nor desirable. The fieldwork for this study thus was mediated by our experiences and those of our informants, a point that has been made by a number of field workers in recent years (Mishler, 1986). To appreciate fully the meaning of behavior and perceptions, as well as to identify and "control for" our own biases, required a research strategy that developed as trust and self-disclosure deepened. We payed particular attention to the ways in which our own presence and biases affected the research setting

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) using the opportunity to analyze the meaning of our presence for and with informants. Along these lines, we were open with our participants about being both personally interested in their individual stories and in our research project. The research design therefore required a perspective in which methodology, data and theory were mutually informing.

An Example: One Leader's Story of Quest

Before entering a discussion of how we interpret the stories, the reader may find it useful to read one leader's story. (Some readers may prefer to skip ahead to the discussion of stories and conclusions before reading the story.) Rather than presenting key phrases or displaying charts, we have crafted a story in an interviewee's words as a way to make sense of the interview data. Given a sensitivity for confidentiality, along with space limitations, we cannot provide all participants' stories for readers and we can't even show one story in its entirety (and probably wouldn't want to). We have included, however, one superintendent's story which we call a story of quest. His story is told below.

The three interviews with Christopher yielded thirty-seven single spaced pages of transcripts, thus the original narrative has been edited greatly for this short story version. We have tried to be faithful to the ideas, words and social contexts of this school leader. The narrator was given copies not only of the transcripts to review, but this story as well in order to insure the story's integrity. What follows, then, is a story jointly constructed by narrator and interviewer (Mishler, 1986).

When I had started at Valhalla it was the fall. I had just come out of college and taught for a year out west....And I had conversations with home and a little subtle pressure was put on

me..saying would you ever think about returning back east to be a little closer to home in case something happened to dad?...I thought it over and said sure. That was a reasonable family expectation. So I made plans to change jobs....I began doing substitute work in the City.....But the more I taught the more I knew clearly this is what I love to do. Meeting kids and teachers. Just having the time of my life....Toward the spring of that year through some people that my then wife and I knew, I was introduced to Valhalla Schools.... He introduced me to the superintendent who I hit it off with right away. We got pretty chummy in the course of a one day visit. I remember going home and saying, This is the place for me. I've got to somehow get connected....I remember it was early June just after the graduation season, and the phone rang one day and it was George Lake. And he said, "Christopher, you're not going to believe this, I just had a resignation land on my desk not five minutes ago. Can you come for an interview?" I didn't answer him....And I was there in a suit maybe twenty minutes later. I think he was still putting the phone into the cradle when I walked through the door. I was offered a contract that day to teach English. And I was just on cloud 9...

Despite whatever I was going through personally, the school always seemed to be my focal point. My satisfaction. I could lose myself in my work. And then do something for or with the kids. That really meant something for me. So not to minimize the pain of the end of a marriage or anything like that or whatever personal problem, it was safe to come home to the bosom of the school. It was that important to me and in my life; that's probably my greatest satisfaction. You know, I was doing something for somebody else. That the more I gave to them, the more I got out of it myself?....And you really had a relationship with these kids....

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As I matured a little bit, I began to think about my life long term. This is pretty cool but is there more I could or should be doing? You get to that point I think professionally where you question the leadership of those above you. You think, gee, I don't know if I would have done it that way. Or I wonder if they thought about this or that. And you didn't have much power or authority within the school. And I began to surmise sometimes, What do I have to do to get that? You know, how can I exert an influence in this school? ...And I'd like to grow. I'm doing the teacher thing and that's fabulous but I can feel that I'm getting hungry for other stuff. And that's when we started conversations, you know, about maybe heading up the department. And so I guess at my third year there they made me department chair. And that was great. Learning a little bit about budgeting, and planning and all of the stuff that goes into it, even though it was a small school and small department. It was good. It was good groundwork for me....

[I read] a beautiful story that really got me to think. Gee, I wonder if someday maybe I'd be a tweeded, pipe smoking, dog patting head of school!....it appeals to me, maybe some day. The seed was planted so to speak. And I got in touch with the way I think. Wouldn't it be neat if, someday....

[Accepted new position at Emerald School.] You know, even if we were sitting around having a few beers at night... as often as not the conversation swung around to kids and teaching and learning. And if I had a school, if I was in charge of a school someday. It was always this kind of "what if" conversation. The thinking the big thoughts with people who knew what they were talking about and who cared. So that was kind of fun. And I guess looking back at it, some of those conversations, you know, nurtured that seed that was planted, what if someday I were to

head a school? What if I had this opportunity what would I do with it? So I was looking at another step along the way...

[I took a new position at Mountain Schools.] The only piece that was missing--There was the guy who was principal...I didn't always agree with him. He was a decent guy and all that but, again, I found myself saying, gee I don't know if I'd do it that way. I wonder if there's more for me than this position. Not to be glib about it but I felt I could do it in my sleep...The teaching part of my job was becoming a no brainer. I could do the material cold....I could feel the urge to do more, to do something else.....And it was then that I really said, you know, I've got to do this...I knew that it was time. And if there aren't going to be growth opportunities for me here then as I look at my life I have to find opportunities elsewhere...

[Became principal at Riverside.] But I got this opportunity at Riverside and I knew that this was the break that I needed, that I wanted. It was close enough so that my relationship with Olivia could continue. You know, we did the commuter romance.....I changed some curriculum things. I had a great working relationship with faculty. I felt as if I had died and gone to heaven...So I was feeling challenged, I was feeling fulfilled. I was just pumped. And that business of heading a school system was there and growing ever more.

[Told story about superintendent who was fired:] I was driving him [superintendent of Riverside] to the airport and he looked awful. And I said, what's the matter? You look terrible. Didn't you sleep last night? He said, "No. I was fired by the board last night." It had been several meetings with the board about his leadership. He was at odds with several members. We as an administrative staff were trying to support him and convince the board that, indeed, he was

the best leader possible for Riverside. But they didn't see fit to continue his tenure. So after three years he was asked to leave. He did one more year and then left. Which broke my heart because as I said I was learning so much from this guy. And this confirmed even more that this is something someday I'd like to do....Became Associate Superintendent....But all along I was thinking this being school leader thing could be kind of cool. It was intriguing.....it was exciting to me. You know, helping to make a difference in schools and all that. But looking at it now, that was a fairly Safe pressure. 'Cause I wasn't the one who was ultimately gonna take it in the neck if things didn't go right. (Laughter) Which I didn't realize at the time. ...

[Courted to return to Valhalla as Assistant Superintendent.] The superintendent [of Valhalla] had let somebody go. He's the guy who hired me originally back in 1972. He was still there. He said, "This has always been your school, you know us, we know you. We need you." It was a wonderful appeal. "You'd be perfect."....In my heart I felt the same way that this was right not only for me professionally, but personally 'cause it was the perfect time for Olivia and for me. It was a hard decision because I loved Riverside.... So I was really torn but I knew down deep that it was a chance to build a life with Olivia and all that stuff.

Went to Valhalla, happily. It was a place I had loved. Knowing that I could really have some clout at a school. I had gotten some experience under my belt at leading schools. I really went in there with a sense of confidence that okay, this is good. This is sort of the next stage for me. I don't want to say I felt cocky about it but I certainly went in confident as all get out. The whole entre was just perfect for us. In May I asked Olivia to marry me. I started the new job July 1. July 10 I turned 40. August 1 we got married. You know, I changed jobs, turned 40, got

married, all within days. I built the schedule at Riverside in June. Arrived at Valhalla July 1 and had to build their schedule. Sight unseen, without knowing a kid, without knowing any of the key players. But I put it all together for them. Planned a wedding and a honeymoon. I mean I was up to my neck. But I loooved it. I was having a ball. I was in my element. I felt like I had arrived. You know, professionally? I could do this. You know at that point in my life I didn't think there was anything I couldn't do. That sounds cocky, but ohhhh, I felt good. So, we got married. The school year started. It started great. We had a strong program. My relationship with the faculty was terrific, some of whom were still there from when I was there originally. So I had some old friends and some new friends. The old friends had no difficulty accepting me now as the boss. Or as a boss...And life was good....

[Became Acting Superintendent when George went on sabbatical.] It was a year of incredible experiences, valuable experiences. I got to learn a lot about the responsibilities of running schools in a pretty safe learning environment. A lab like experience. I had good board members who were working with me. I couldn't go too far off the path? Because they were right there, you know, to guide me. I tried not to bother George much because he was away enjoying a year of much needed rest and relaxation. So I found myself really intrigued by it all and more and more thinking, okay I'm getting to the point where I might want to try this on my own....

[Became Superintendent of Schools]....I remember there was a knock on the front door. The way that house was set up we rarely used the front door. And so I said, I'll go get it. It was getting dark. And I opened the front door and there was Natasha, the board chair, and I'll never

forget this, she looked me right square in the eye and said, Good evening Mr. Superintendent. I got all filled up. I started crying. I mean I just gave her a big hug. She said the board has just elected you superintendent of Valhalla Schools. It was a moment like few others in a person's life. In a lot of ways it was the realization of a dream. A school where I had started out as a young man, you know an inexperienced kid fresh out of college where the superintendent took a chance on me. And here he's sort of passing the mantle of leadership on to me...

[Installation ceremony.] It set the tone for what I had at that point in time thought was going to be, I suppose naively, forever and ever amen. You know I just, it was, it was one of the high points of my life. Now I'm officially the leader at a place that I dearly love.....family and friends were near by. It doesn't get much better than that.

So life was good. We were cutting the deficit. Enrollment was up. I was happy. We had gotten married. We had a beautiful daughter. We were in the process of planning for another child. And life, I would have to say it was sort of at the crest of the wave. The dream had come true. I kept, I remember pinching myself, so to speak, every once in a while, can this really be real? This is too good to be true. I was deliriously happy. I remember going to [a conference] ....and seeing a lot of those people from my new superintendents' class, half a dozen of whom had already been fired or quit. At that point...the average life expectancy of a school superintendent was 3 ½ years. ....it was a period when life was short for school leaders. A couple of my colleagues had already been canned, or as I said, on their way out...but I thought I'm so lucky because I love my school, I love my board, I love my kids, you know, I was just feeling REALLY good about everything I did. The board, the school, my personal life was

cooking right along, I was deliriously happy with the baby. So, I was pumped. But! (laughter) Maybe that's a good place to pause!...

But I remember at the end of, I guess it was my first year, and I had to write a performance evaluation on myself....one of the things I remember citing in the letter to the board was, you have to remember folks, I'm an educator not a manager....that was a phrase I NEVER should have used. Because that came back to haunt me every time I turned around. They fixated on that. Christopher's not a manager...We showed a positive balance at the end of the [first] year...spent the surplus on deferred maintenance, things that we had institutionally neglected for years. Things were good. The board felt this guy is doing all right....

By the beginning of my fourth year things had really started to erode internally. Ah, some new faces on the board. A new board chair came in. A person with whom I did not see eye to eye very often. A very different style from my first board chair.

So this fellow who came on as board chair, and I'll never forget, Olivia and I were expecting Ian. And the board chair and I were supposed to go to Washington for a meeting... about leadership and partnership. And I had to cancel at the last minute because Olivia was going into labor. Ian was on the way. He never, never, never forgave me. He never forgot about it....when I was resigning he said, you know, I knew it wasn't going to work when you canceled that meeting to go to Washington. So he's a workaholic and the school should come first. That was never my style. So we got off on the wrong foot. We had a tough time. The first year of his term was okay. We weren't too crazy about each other but we got the job done....

I suppose, this is my naivete—I thought two members of the administrative team were

conducting business....They weren't doing much....We came in late on the budget. And the board was furious. We had a special board meeting in September...[Chair said,] "You know, you're not much of a manager." It started to come back. I said you can call it what you want but I'm not following anybody. You know, we'll ride this out. And we went into crisis management. We froze salaries....we cut back ...We did everything possible to cut the projected deficit....And then every time I had a meeting with the board chair, he was second guessing decisions. Why did you do that ? It wasn't, things weren't running as smoothly....and he laid the blame directly at my feet for not having managed that.....But the underlying issue was confidence in me was eroding even from my supporters. Things appeared to be unraveling. I was trying to keep my finger in the dike....And they wanted to see if I could quote, manage my way out of this....

[At the time we were in the middle of a major fund raising campaign.] We were working very hard...twice a week we had a dinner party for the better part of the year at our house. We had almost no private life...entertaining....All for the good of the school. And more or less sacrificing our own personal life for the school. And I was becoming increasingly weary of some of the politics, of feeling unsupported and second guessed by my board chair...

[At meetings I heard stories of how other school leaders are supported by their boards.] And here I'm thinking to myself my chair gets mad if I take a few long weekends in the summer. Ahh, something's not right here. So Olivia and I talked a little bit and I said, I'm miserable. I'm just not happy. I'm tired of fighting the fight...

[A key committee recommended against Christopher's strategic plan.] "Christopher's wrong on this." So the handwriting on the wall is getting larger and larger. And I'm saying to

myself, you know, I don't need this crap. I just don't need it. You know, I have a life. I deserve a life. I don't mind fighting the good fight but I really felt as if I was trying to stem a rising tide. And, you know, the special ed stuff, the enrollment. It was just making me nuts....It was harder and harder for me to go out and put the game face on for fund raising when I, when I no longer felt the passion for the school?...I mean Valhalla had always been a very, very important, a very special place for me. I mean I bled the red and white of Valhalla. I mean that was part of my, the kids were born there, they were christened in the local church. You know, the whole bit. But I kept coming home, just shaking my head. Olivia said, "What's the matter?" I said, I don't know if I can do this. I'm just tired of the crap. Isabel said to me at breakfast one day, "You hate going to work everyday don't you daddy?" And it was pretty much then that I....talked to one of the board people that I was very close to, the first board president that I had and a couple of others. And said, I just don't know if I can do it anymore. "No, no, don't rush into it." I said, I think I've got to step aside. I said I'm miserable....You know, I don't know that I can be an effective leader. I don't feel the support. "Oh, no we support you." I don't feel the support. And I think we want different things....

And I'm tired of fighting the fight....I say black, you say white. I say go, you say stop. And I said, you know what, I'm done. I remember we had a breakfast meeting with one of the most influential board members of them all. He said, "What do you want to do?" I said what I'd like to do is step down. He said, "Why don't you go a year from now?" I said it's not going to get any better, I'm not going to get any healthier...

So I said we're at cross purposes here. We're not seeing it the way I envisioned it when I

came on. I thought you wanted this but you really want that. We were at the fork in the road, one going east one going west....It's almost that you need to know when to jump before you get pushed. Before this goes any farther south.....I'd been in this business long enough and I had seen and heard the horror stories of many a friend and colleague who got called into a breakfast meeting and told turn in your keys....

I didn't feel that I was physically strong enough to survive another year. And I, I was just a mess....miserable. I don't want to say depressed, maybe I was, I don't know, but I didn't want to see people. A lot of people said to me, "What's the matter with Christopher, he's not himself?" You know, people would come by for dinner or drinks and I just wasn't my old self. I was so preoccupied, consumed by school stuff. So I thought, well I've got to get my life back. So I said I'm going to gamble and take a year...and I'll try to get a job....

[Accepted new position as principal at Hudson School. While there courted to be superintendent at yet another district.] They said we're letting our person go, would you come down and be the superintendent? I'm flattered. I love your schools. I think it's a cool place but no. I want to stay right here for awhile. I don't want to say lick my wounds but I think get sort of back on track. And I think that for me and for Olivia and for the kids this is where I need to be right now. We have a life. I work hard but I have time for my family, for my friends again That I didn't have in Valhalla. And I get to do some things that I haven't done in a long time. I get to teach again. I get to be with kids. I get to go to soccer games and cross country. I mean I just didn't have time for that.

I have time for my own children. I have time for Olivia. Candace (superintendent at

Hudson) puts in an unbelievable amount of time. She's tireless...no husband...kids are grown. Her life is the school.....I want to watch my children open Christmas presents...run around the yard being cowboys. I'm almost 50. I can count...They're used to having dad around now....I don't have to say, No, I can't read you a bedtime story, I have to go to a meeting.

It was an adventure. There were days when I was so angry...and depressed, I guess that's not the right word. Busting my tail, but for what? I was underappreciated, undervalued. This made me not happy at home....There were days when I didn't think I would survive. That I'd end up in an early grave. Olivia said I walked like this [slumped, bent over]. So that's my sad tale...

So that dream got broken and things looked grim, but the sun comes up tomorrow! It's what we tell our kids. I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and looked at alternatives...I'm better off now.....People ask, do you want to be superintendent again. I feel fine, okay with what I do. Is it perfect, do I get everything I need? No, but I don't think that you ever do. It's okay. It works.

I guess I've taken a whole different view of leadership. I think for me, at least, it's been a kind of transformation that says, If I'm doing my job well and effectively, and I'm true to myself and my career goals, my philosophy of what education is for kids, the leadership just sort of falls into place quite naturally....Having gone through the experience and come out of it, I wouldn't say jaded, but the better for it. I see leadership a little differently now. And it needs to be more natural. I do what I have to do and I do the right thing for the school, for kids, for me. And as a result I'm more comfortable in the whole role of being quote a leader. I don't have to

try to be a leader, if that makes any sense. And I watch it here and at some other places, people who are trying to get that first principalship or that first division head job. They're scrambling around, almost playing at the role of being school leader. To a degree that's good. But relax a little bit. Be more yourself. And I think the long term benefits will be better. I'm comfortable now with who I am and my role in the school...

[Olivia and I had a] conversation about what's next? Is this going to be a long term thing for us or short term? Every once in while I get a little itchy for the superintendency again, being in the larger venue where I'm more a direct player in the decision making process. Then I step back and say, hmm, do I really want that? Because all those things come at a price. In previous places I payed for it by lack of family time and family life. Here I work hard, I have a wonderful school, great kids, wonderful teachers to be with, good parent body. And I have a life. So I say to myself, hmmm. In the grand scheme of things, what's more valuable to me? Being in the office at 6:30 in the morning and getting home at 9:00 at night and then seeing my kids grow up by way of photographs. Or do I want to be a part of their childhoods? You can work hard and do all the things I have to do but not to the degree that I missed out on being with Olivia. So when weighed, I think life is good. This is a good place to be. This is a good way to enjoy the kids' youth. And at some point when they're a little bit older, maybe think differently about my career again. It's a time out period for me maybe. Get my health back, my life on track. It's been a healthy period....

But the first time in a long, long time I think I'm pretty comfortable with who I am as an educator, with who I am as a leader. And I don't always feel like I've got to try to be on. I just

do it. And it's much more natural. So I think that's probably the healthiest thing that's come out of the whole process of coming through this.....I have reached a level of maturity, whatever you want to call it. I don't have to press. This is who I am and what I am. I'm comfortable with that. Others who know me seem to be comfortable with it also. And that's a good thing. I guess my focus is less on my career and more on who I am as a person. The kind of husband and father I want to be. And the kind of educator I want to be. And that supercedes the career goal. For awhile I was more career goal oriented. I wanted to be a school superintendent. And that tended to be the focus.... I feel very fortunate to have had that opportunity as young as I had it. And most of that experience was very, very good. We focused on some of the pain of that experience. But we learned of great life lessons there. And I'll always be grateful for that piece of my life. I guess it's part of being a lifelong learner. You benefit from every experience that you have. I think I benefitted. Does that mean I'm complacent in my career? No, I don't mean to imply that. I'm not settling. I'm just at a good place, feeling good about it. And saying, why make myself nuts, I'm enjoying this. Take the time to enjoy it and do it well....

[After recent meeting with friends who are superintendents...] Who needs it? You know, I see the stress and tension in their eyes. I know what it's like to live under that kind of constant pressure from the board, from the parents, from every constituency of the school. And is that what I really want to be doing? Nahh. So I came home. Had a great night's sleep....But they're going to get back on their planes and go home to God knows what. And Monday morning. I pretty much know what to expect Monday morning. They don't (laughter). So again, I keep saying for here and now this is a good place to be....I'm in a good place intellectually and

professionally. 'Cause I know what I'm doing. I feel to some degree I'm in control of my life where I hadn't been in control, other people had too much to say about how and when you do things. And maybe that's not true of all school leaders...maybe I let people have too much control. But regardless, I'm happy with my station in life right now. And I think because of that it translates to my leadership style. People feel comfortable with me and confident in me. Because I'm comfortable and confident....

Sometimes when I was a school superintendent I never, I shouldn't say never, I didn't always have the time to do those things with faculty. I felt often that I was too consumed with board issues, the long range planning of the school, the fund raising, whatever it was. But I didn't really have time to be there for the kids and the faculty. And I think that's where I'm pretty good. So it's been good to be back in that mode....

And so I think sometimes I may have in my eagerness to be the superintendent there, allowed them to direct me in a way that I really didn't believe in, but did because it was good for me or good for my career kind of thing....and thought I could maybe change it once I got going on it. And that turned out not to be the case. I clearly wanted to move in one direction and they clearly wanted to move in another..and okay never the twain shall meet. I'd be more careful about the district I'd go to. And I think just having had the experience I would know more what to watch out for. I would be able to read the warning signals a little earlier. You know it's like making waffles. You throw the first one out and the rest of them are really much better after that. Ahh, it's not that your first superintendency's a throw away but it's akin to that. I think I'd go into it with a little more savvy, I guess. If I do. I don't know. I told you I had a couple of

calls....

But I do think it's possible to be truer to myself as a school leader than I was the first time through. I was just so, I want it [said in stage whisper]....Knowing that I was answerable to that board. Knowing that they hire and fire the superintendent, the superintendent hires and fires everybody else. I was always dancing on the skillet...

But, you know, some things got put in place during my watch. And I have to frame it in the context that says, well that's good. It fits in the overall scheme of the place. Had I not been there maybe it wouldn't have happened the way it did. So I keep looking for the positive things. And I've become less and less bitter. I've been able to let go of it....

[Talking about current superintendent...] She's a workaholic. She has no other life than school. How lucky we are to have someone like that. And she is magnificent. She doesn't miss a beat. Every i is dotted, every t is crossed. She is awesome. I would be too if I didn't have anything else in my life but school. I want more in my life than the school....I mean I love my job, I love my school, I love to work hard...but my family came first. And I've seen too many people put the reverse in place. And then when the school decides you're not the one anymore (click of finger) drop you like a hot potato. Thanks, what have you done for me lately? I mean I know two guys in particular who gave their life's blood to schools and were both called back from vacation to be summarily fired. Turn in your keys you're done.....So it's a little scary. It's a little scary. I'm not ready to play that game. Not yet. Not for awhile....

Interviewer: Another person I interviewed said that now that he is a grandfather he feels he has a chance to make up with his grand kids what he didn't do with his own kids. ____

Bingo. I couldn't agree more. And for me, I'm going to be 50 in July, God willing, and I'm not going to get a shot at grandchildren. And so this is it for me. And by God, I'm not going to miss it. And I'm not going to say, wish I had, I wonder what it would have been like to. I mean I want to be in it for every bit of it. Whether it's pajama night in school or the first soccer game. I don't care what it is. I'm going to be there. Everything else get out of my way.

Now I see my life a little differently..... And again, not to be maudlin about it, I think that episode I had last winter, that changed me a little bit too. I mean to be 48 years old and have a heart attack. That was a little sobering. To say, wait a minute, wait just one minute here. In the blink of an eye it could all be history. So that's helped me look at my life and situation a little bit differently also. Is that the main piece? No. But it's a factor....a residual piece [of Valhalla]. It's funny I remember when my physician came in that first morning. I had the heart attack on Sunday. Jeffrey was sitting on my bed Monday morning when I woke up...He said, "I can't believe you had it now....I would have thought you'd've had it while you were still at Valhalla. I thought everything was great, you were happy at Hudson, you had last year off." I said, well yeah, I did. But it was a stressful year looking for a position and all that, and the right position. I found one, was happy at it and then to have the heart attack...But I guess your body sort of let's you know when it's okay to let down a little bit. How many teachers get sick the first day of vacation? They tough it out until the kids go, and now they can relax and get their cold or flu for spring break.....it's so predictable and it certainly was for me. But the things that become important. Yeah, career but much more family. Much more family....

I think I was pretty good at most of it. Did I have some faults? Yeah, I think I was much

too eager to try to please people. Everybody.....It's big time different. It really is. Yeah, yeah. It's that seasoning, you gotta go through it. Bottom line, am I better for having had the entire experience? Absolutely.

A Story of Quest

As we look at the narrative above that Christopher constructed for himself and the listener, we see a story that tells how he eventually accepted and sought to use the leadership crisis. Given some time and distance, he now believes that he has benefitted from the painful experience and like Frank (1995) who studies illness stories, we call this a story of quest. Frank finds that "quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to *use* it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience (p. 115)." We think that Christopher's story is similar to the ill person who tells a quest narrative, a story that is not one of medicine's triumphs over disease but of an individual who takes charge of his own story regardless of the medical outcome. Christopher does not speak of management strategies or hero-inspired maneuvers or reform interventions that led the way out of his leadership crisis. Instead, he confronts the pain and tells his own story of personal and professional growth. In this sense he has become a hero of his own making.

The meaning of the uninvited interruption in his career path was not immediately apparent. He tells how in the beginning he tried to fix the problem but it would not go away and only got worse. As problems deepened he couldn't deny them and was compelled to respond. This unanticipated messy situation was not part of his plan, yet could not be ignored. We hear of his

suffering during this extremely difficult time period in his life. He reports that he was becoming emotionally, socially and physically drained. Not only was he bombarded by threats from the outside, he was experiencing internal threats and wonders if he was becoming depressed. At the end of the critical episode we learn about how his journey continues. Meaning was gradually revealed to him as he wrestled retrospectively with what happened and sought alternative ways of being an educator.

Interestingly, we learn that he does not want to return to who he was before the crisis. He has moved on and in a sense has reinvented himself. The critical events became a foundation for personal change and growth. By the end of the story we see an individual who is much less concerned with how others view him as a leader, and more focused on how he sees himself. He has reconciled who he is with how others see him, and feels satisfaction in knowing that he is now truer to his own beliefs and values. He speaks of being transformed as a leader, and as a family man. In the story we witness a changed individual.

Although while living the horror of his crisis he could not say this, today he is grateful for what happened. He recognizes that it gave something to him that has made him different, perhaps stronger, perhaps wiser, certainly changed. The new awareness comes not simply from survival but rather from a conscious effort to integrate the pain into who and how he is today. He has learned and is learning from a crisis past.

Different readers will likely interpret this story in different ways. While there are some people who might interpret Christopher's narrative to be a story of rationalization or failure, he does not see it that way. He says he could be "licking his wounds" but is not. Christopher's

woundedness and the losses stemming from the crisis have been used as an opportunity to look at himself and his life from the inside out. In a sense he was lost and has found himself; the self has returned. As he and his story have developed, he has found a voice and uses it to tell others of suffering and healing. At the point when we leave Christopher's quest story, he acknowledges that he is changed and is confident about who he will become, even though he is not sure what that is. Like the individual who suffers a devastating medical illness but tells how he feels more alive than ever, Christopher reflects:

> I think I was pretty good at most of it. Did I have some faults? Yeah, I think I was much too eager to try to please people...It's big time different. It really is....It's that seasoning, you gotta go through it. Bottom line, am I better for having had the entire experience? Absolutely.

Christopher has no expectation of returning to the status quo of life before the leadership crisis. Instead, his journey has become a quest for his own story, a good story.

A Story of Restitution & A Story of Chaos

Two narratives yielded surprisingly parallel and generative findings regarding what Frank (1995) calls "the problem of control and predictability (p.31)." Illness is often about learning to live with lost control suggesting that the body, in the case of illness, experiences a continuum from predictability to contingency at the other end of the spectrum. Contingency is the condition of being subjected to forces one thinks one cannot control. From the perspective of leadership, the narratives of Joan and Karen caused us to examine closely how leaders respond to lost predictability. Their respective stories, however, diverge along different narrative paths.

The Wounded Leader: Looking for the Good Story

The essential story line--plot--as told by both principals was at first glance surprisingly similar. Joan is a fourth year principal of a K-8 school of approximately 800 children located in a middle class suburban community. Karen is a second year principal of a rural middle school with a student body of about 300 students. Both principals described themselves as "collaborative." Joan ("I always run things by people and get their input. I can't recall an incident where I've said this is how we're doing things folks.") and Karen ("I don't like to force myself on people. I like to find out where they are coming from.") described their initial entry period by means of an "incident" through which they believed they were "tested" by their respective communities (a child carrying a gun in the case of Joan, the suspension of a group of boys for fighting in the case of Karen). In both situations, they described the successful resolution of their respective entry incidents, and acknowledged receiving the approbation of their communities. At the same time, they say the incidents left them wondering not only if they "did the right thing," but exactly who they were in their communities and whether their style of leadership was appropriate and acceptable. Karen told us "a command style of leadership" seemed to be expected of her and this was not her style. Similarly, Joan found her faculty and parents saying, "So, what are you going to do about such and such and I was constantly reminded they had no sense of being part of a decision--in fact, they didn't want to be part of the decision." Joan and Karen went on to describe, respectively, some of the major events in their tenure which caused them to question who they were, what they were doing and how others were perceiving them.

Joan opened up her daily newspaper one morning to find a headline as follows: "JOAN WILLOW (name disguised) a TYRANT!" The article, based on a letter that an apparently irate

parent in her school had sent to the newspaper, went on to describe a series of decisions that Joan had made regarding the parent's children, his wife (a school employee) and the school program. As Joan tells the story, a number of other articles were subsequently sent by the same parent to the newspaper, detailing further alleged misdeeds by Joan with yet another headline: "WILLOW, WEAK AND DEFENSELESS." As Joan described her reactions:

> I value my reputation certainly, but especially as a leader! People need to have confidence in your ability. There are parents who don't necessarily know me that well who are gong to read this and think, hmmm...there is something else going on here. I didn't know this woman was like this.

Joan says she called her lawyer and superintendent to determine what she could do about the letters. She was told that as a semi-public official, she was "fair-game." It would be difficult to argue and/or prove slander. Joan's reaction was as follows:

> I just had to back down and it felt weird that I just had to wait and hope for other people to support me. I felt powerless. I felt slammed. It was unbelievable, it was very upsetting, I had a hard time sleeping. Oh, great, I'm a tyrant and weak and defenseless. In the meantime, I did feel powerless. I did feel defenseless, I was. I had to rely on other people to say no, "She's not that bad, she's not a tyrant." And to choose that word when I take such pains to not be autocratic, to be collaborative, to work with people. It was the antithesis of what I was. It didn't make me question what I was. I knew, but to have that in black and white in the public. It was appalling--it was more than appalling. It was deeply upsetting

> because really that article it was not just about my leadership style, it was who I am. And it was saying publically that I was someone that I'm definitely not and I didn't want myself defined in that way. When you lose control of the definition you have to depend on other people; someone has taken something very precious away.

Joan told us that enormous support soon began to emerge from parents, teachers, students, community groups--countering the charges that had been leveled against her. Subsequently, the person who had made the original complaints wrote a letter of apology followed by a meeting with Joan where the apology was rendered in person. Joan commented, "There was a kind of redemption and it was over."

To be a school leader is to be more than a screen on which the wishes of others are projected. Nevertheless, parents, teachers and students do wish to see qualities in their leaders and ascribe meanings to their actions or lack of actions. The way leaders manage this process is, in fact, a skill of leadership. The ability to preserve a hold on reality--in Joan's case, some control over the definition of her public "self"--is, in our view, a legitimate test of leadership and, perhaps, experience and maturity.

We find Joan's story approaches what Frank calls the restitution narrative--"yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again." The restitution narrative, as reflected in Joan's story acknowledges the devastating "interruption" that these letters caused and, at the same time, anticipates and even expects an eventual end to the crisis. Concomitantly, Joan saw the restitution of her "self," a bit scarred but determined to get on with her work. The

restitution narrative suggests a positive interpretation to Joan's story. The ability to tolerate the illness--frank feedback, however misguided and mis-intended, allowed Joan to see her "self" and her leadership capacities in a new light.

Karen's story diverges somewhat from Joan's. In Karen's case, a singular incident didn't signal the crisis. However, after a year and a half on her job, Karen found herself staring at her picture on the cover of a local newspaper, at the center of a litany of allegations and accusations that morale was at an all time low at the school, and a principal who is "out of touch." As Karen recounted:

> When I came here I believe they expected and I'm beginning to understand it's probably in a lot of other places too--the command style of leadership --you do this, you do this, you do that. And I AM JUST NOT THAT WAY!! I am just not that way. I tried to shape things a little differently and it started by shaping how we handled faculty meetings and, uh I had been coached a bit not to go too fast. I tried to have this notion of people speaking up, being able to formulate their own decisions, playing your own tune but being in a jazz band kind of thing. And I see some of that working now, but in the first 18 months, I asked people when I first came to host a faculty meeting in their own room. Before that as I understand, they had gone down to the library and the principal set up the agenda and they checked it off. In that first 18 months, that kind of eliciting from people was just so foreign. Where are these people?
>
> I just didn't assess how entrenched in old systems this place was, not that they

> were wrong, just old ways. Thirty teachers full and part time. Just doing things differently and exploring differently. And the other part I found that some of their systems were not readily evident or available even to them. Those are the things I had to weigh. Not being the stand-up type--" you do this," I think, has hurt in some ways. And yet, the other part is I called them on things that I saw that they were reluctant to do.

Karen's story approaches what Frank calls the "chaos narrative." These kinds of stories, as Frank suggests, are chaotic in their absence of narrative order. They are told as events, without sequence or discernable causality. As Frank says, "the story traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around (p.98)." And, to some extent, this seemed to be the case with Karen. Hearing Karen's story was not easy. There was a kind of dissociation in the telling, as well as a scattering of events, rationales and circumstances that made it hard to hear, as well as tell, we suspect. The chaos narrative depends on the view that no one is in control and, to some extent, this seemed to be the case with Karen. It wasn't clear how events had gotten to the point they had gotten to and steps to "control" the sweep of events seemed to be contingent on other things. As Karen says:

> There were those moments that I had some doubt in my skills, is this really it? Did I do something terribly wrong? Being out of line? It's easy to blame someone else, they did it to me. But I don't look at it that way. I look at it as a kind of shared piece and part of the shared piece I believe is that I didn't understand the culture of the community well enough. Now whether I could change that I don't know. In a way, it kind of lifts the burden off of me. Because sometimes I take things in and

> say, what did I do wrong? I have caused people to be upset, because that's not how I think life should be. Because there are so many things in people's lives. I don't want to make them worse. That might have been a way I relieved some pressure on myself but also take what these people have said and address it in some way. The other part is that I have come to feel that there is a culture here and maybe I don't fit.

Both of these stories suggest to us that in leader relationships, leaders are significantly influenced and defined, in part, by the desires of significant others and when leaders feel they need to act out of the desires of others, considerable ambivalence is experienced. Both Joan and Karen believed that a principal doesn't know best, and wanted to enable everyone to examine carefully the many competing adult interests within a school, collectively determine what the issues and problems were to be solved, and determine how to mobilize their own group resources to solve those problems. Yet, they encountered communities which seemed to believe that principals should know best. This became the context for their stories and their respective plot lines reveal how they began to question themselves, their motives, and their own capacities for controlling and predicting the flow of events.

We find that the idea of the restitution and chaos narrative provides a kind of scaffolding for listening and interpreting these kinds of stories, particularly when leaders bear the brunt of other's projections. Moreover, viewing narratives in the light of these kinds of typologies (and we think there are many others to explore) brings home to us a way of looking at how leaders deal with stressful situations and the unique nature of adaptive leadership capacities.

Conclusions

This study has increased our understanding of how school leaders construct stories of crises and has found similarities to the narratives told about illness (Frank, 1995). Like Frank, we are reluctant to identify a typology, but we did find that the difficult experiences evoked stories that could be tentatively grouped by common themes. The storytellers chose a restitution story of how the problem was fixed and echoed the myth of principal as hero; a chaos story of near disaster that was notable by what was absent, that is a distressed telling without order or coherence and an uncertain future; or a story of quest, one that leads to a new or evolved story. All themes, however, are apt to be present at different times in each of the stories. Our interest next was in how lives were affected by these different stories.

A second observation leading to another conclusion relates to the particular ways in which participants were self-conscious and aware of themselves as story-makers and tellers, thus could become in a sense "witnesses" to their circumstances. In different ways each of the participants reflected some awareness of the plot, logic, causality and narrative tensions of their own stories. One participant has the ability to acknowledge the difficulty of her circumstances and at the same time her inability to rise to the occasion her dilemmas had created. Nevertheless, she was grateful that the unfortunate circumstance had presented itself and her story reflected this awareness. Another participant who seemed overwhelmed, struggled to gain the capacity to see it. In our view, the narrators seemed aware that their story was a story and that they had some control over the part they had played.

Professors and professional developers of educational administrators need to consider

ways to create conditions that allow this kind of telling and listening to assist the healing and growth of practitioners. We are reminded of the importance of story and how in classrooms and workshops too often dilemmas are dealt with in the third person, forgetting the person. As researchers it has been a privilege to hear and be a part of these stories. Our hope is that crisis stories can be honored and school leaders can be supported in their quest for the good story.

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